

# **STRATEGIC SOCIAL WAR**



**introductory notes on insurrectionist praxis**

## *Preface: A Measure of Power*

*It is the dead of night, or perhaps a little later. Three individuals are preparing to depart from their house, where they live, cook, laugh, read, and sleep. Tonight, of course, they are not sleeping—wide awake, they gather a few prepared supplies, feeling the preliminary surge of adrenaline through their bodies. Masks, gloves, disposable clothing, hammers, and spray paint are all that is required. They depart on bicycles towards the city center. In the darkness, the only noise is six narrow bike tires whispering across the pavement. The traffic lights along the main street flash yellow and red, dim mannequins stare out from store windows, an occasional passerby walks home from the local bar. Our comrades smile with satisfaction at the nearly deserted metropolis, as the quiet possibility of night embraces each of them.*

*They hide their bikes between two houses on a side street and step out into the orange glare of the streetlights. The bank is a short walk away. Just before they enter the sight of the first security camera, they don their masks and quicken their pace. Ahead, bright fluorescents still illuminate one of the many faces of capital: its well-polished windows, the confident logo, the pretense of welcome security. One of the masked individuals opens her backpack and pulls out two hammers, handing one to her friend. They approach the bank with hearts racing, and with a quiet, competent rage, smash each window and ATM screen. The glass breaks easily.*

*As the alarm rings, the remaining individual paints in bold letters on the ruined façade: “THIS IS SOCIAL WAR.”*

*The group absconds into the night. The sounds of six bike tires mingle with our comrades’ empowered murmurs.*

*The next morning the police puzzle over the useless security tapes and print-less hammers left at the scene. An insurance company pays for the replacement of the windows, while the bank manager spends a few exasperated minutes over increased premiums.*

*In two days, the bank has reopened, and people continue to deposit and withdraw money from its vaults.*

## A War of Position

Where do we stand? Obviously opposed to the social order. Obviously hating our jobs. Obviously disgusted by class relations. Decrying the empty individualistic greed of consumerism, the despicable manifestations of authority in our daily lives, the insidious oppressions socialized into our behavior. We know all of the isms.

So some of us avoid shopping. Some drop out, live collectively, eat trash, steal, avoid work. We travel, or wear dirty black clothes, or strike out against the behemoth in the ways we know how. Our current positions are infoshops, demonstrations, convergences, affinity groups, reading groups, discussion groups.

All of this occurs with the usual cast of friends, acquaintances, and allies. Many have come to terms with the anarchist subculture—we can travel across the country and see the same familiar faces at each site of conflict. For estranged enemies of capitalism, this is a welcome comfort. Our project has been to break with our own hierarchical socializations, so we find ourselves adrift, gravitating towards the nearest sign of hope, to those few and far between like-minded individuals among whom we can feel a little less alienated.

The individual: the core unit of capitalism. We searched for one another as individuals, as ourselves, estranged by modernity—embodying our *personal* ideas, thoughts, appearances, histories... our *identity*. And it follows that we

encountered one another as individuals, and assumed that you were not as potent an ally if you didn't look, speak, or act like us. The logic of individuality determined that we could only meet on the basis of our collective alienation. Therein contained was the usual judgment, gossip, mistrust, and social maneuvering we had hoped to escape.

We thought we could free ourselves first, gather outside of the dreadful conditions we knew, and return to attack. We forgot that without context we are powerless. Our context, our position, has become the subculture. In practice: five hundred anarchists converge on a city for a confrontational action—property is destroyed, resistance demonstrated, police outsmarted or repression meted out...and the metropolis continues as if the interlude was planned all along, or as if the interlude was *part of the metropolis*. With the subculture as our only position we find ourselves scrambling for footing.

The blind subservients of the mainstream media stumbled upon a truth when they called us the “traveling anarchist circus.” Not because we are strange or introduce mayhem, but because we set up camp, put on a show, and move on—leaving the landscape essentially unchanged. Perhaps even worse, our more stable manifestations can operate as local curiosity shops and private clubs. A yuppie couple walks by a storefront covered in anarchist posters: “Oh honey, how interesting, an *infoshop*!” Inside, a group of mostly white youth is watching *Breaking the Spell*. More than likely the infoshop will disappear within a few years, like any other presence that is unessential to the local dynamics. The anarchist localities in

the US that continue to exist do so for a reason: relevance beyond the local subculture, or being birthed from one that has transcended its boundaries as such.

It is our task, then, to define a position that exists outside of individuality and outside of the non-location of subculture. We must *place* ourselves—simultaneously digging-in and preparing for our next offensive.

## Strategic Engagements

For decades, the ways in which we have approached the conflict with capital and power have fallen short. To begin, our collective force is only a whisper of what it was a hundred years ago. With the promise of middle-class existence, capital quite successfully undermined the labor movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the anarchist tendency. That movement has since been conveniently replaced by our subcultural politics, our politics of identity. A resistance successfully atomized into lifestylism and activism.

The residues of atomization have remained with us during each act of sabotage. The broken window becomes an outlet for our alienation rather than a truly threatening strike against the heart of capital; our attack is turned into a steam valve rather than a lit fuse. The manager may tremble with rage or fear, the police may lash out with predictable malice—but it is only their pitiful delusions that have been shattered; the dreams of the sleeping behemoth remain uninterrupted. After all, the manager and the lieutenant are under capital's spell; we cannot



mistake their snorts of indignation as anything other than a small sign that we are moving in the right direction.

Therefore, we call for *strategic engagement*. We desire to develop an insurrectionary praxis where we are fully aware of capital's tendency to atomize and recuperate. A small clandestine group carrying out sabotage across the metropolis can become ultimately as ineffectual as the monthly liberal anti-war march—though they are infinitely more annoying to the state, and certainly have more revolutionary potential. It is our goal to realize that potential, to expose the latent social war in all spheres of life. As long as the saboteurs remain isolated and alone, the conditions of misery will reign.

It is not enough to simply develop our subculture into a more actively confrontational one, where each affinity group regularly paints graffiti, breaks windows, or even burns down police stations. Such a development, pursued alone, falls into the familiar traps of isolation set for us by history. If we proceed in this way the battle will remain between us and the police, as citizens remain citizens, those uninvolved spectators. We seek to transcend our boundaries, to broaden the front of engagement.

As anarchists, it is our tendency to approach social war *as anarchists*. Capital would enjoy nothing better—as a group of individuals, we are easy to repress, ignore, or include in dialogue. Obviously this is not our goal.

## “Solidarity Means Attack”

Our subculture has come to emphasize the *attack*. We are compelled to act immediately, despite the sheer impoverishment of our revolutionary context. We cannot wait until the “right moment,” the progression of capital is too rapid to spare even one more second.

To the quiet satisfaction of our most intelligent enemies, the ethos of attack has come to imply a neglect of a developed long-term strategy. We of course understand that every recruiting center, police station, and real-estate development needs to be razed as soon as possible. But we ask: is attempting to do this all *right now* the most efficient or strategic approach? Here, we ask those not concerned with efficiency to reconsider; we desire an *efficient* destruction of capitalism. A destruction that is efficient not only in the overthrow of the social order, but also in the production of love, rage, and revolutionary joy. A destruction that is efficient, not in the sense of Taylor’s assembly line, but in the sense of his worst nightmare: the *disassembly* of the assembly line. The humans-turned-machine, autonomously throwing off their chains as adeptly as possible in order to pursue the desires of the heart.

In order to achieve this paradoxical efficiency, we must look beyond the short term. A series of confrontational tactics does not compose a strategy. An attack can expand the offensive or contract it: sabotage met with cynicism and repression, or empowerment and popular rage.

Here, we are clearly not looking for “acceptance” in the liberal sense—we are sickened by incessant invocation of “strategy” used to co-opt radical movements. But we also question those who believe that it is always appropriate to attack immediately. Our actions should not just consist of clandestine attack, but also in the underground building of a revolutionary situation. In the most basic sense: in hoping to ignite an explosive insurrection, we had sometimes forgotten to first place the necessary charges. These preparatory activities may often take more nuanced forms than the nighttime raid or the riot.

It has also been said, “Solidarity means attack”. We propose that this ignores the defensive potential of any insurrection. Some of most powerful social forces in history have been fought in defense, against intrusion by an outsider—they are *conservative*. To date, most of these battles have been fought in the name of religion or nationalism. It is quite telling, however, that at the moment we have very little to defend: no established anarchist neighborhoods, no widespread food-distribution networks, no autonomous city councils—only usually transitory infoshops and collective houses.

However, unlike nationalists or religious fundamentalists, we know that liberation is intrinsic. It does not need to be created: only realized, uncovered, and protected. This realization is the first step of an *active defense*.

The principles of attack and defense are complimentary; our forays against capital reveal liberated space, which is to be

immediately occupied. The neglect of one approach to the other dooms us to ineffectuality. Where does our attack end and our defense begin? The praxis which we envision makes use of an active defense in addition to relentless calculated attack—blurring the lines of each into a revolutionary force that is powerful precisely because it is simultaneously offensive and defensive.

## The Conditions of Engagement

For us, it is quite fortunate that the social war currently exists on many fronts: under the surface, but indisputably present. The contradictions within capitalism and authority have always been felt if not fully articulated. With every eviction, every act of police violence, every layoff, every polluted river, every rape, we see the lines of the front drawn more clearly. The social war is ongoing—and we desire to constitute ourselves as a developed force within it. Our enemies, on the other hand, are already organized, and they frequently recognize themselves as standing openly on the terrain of social struggle; they understand the social divide and police us accordingly. As insurrectionists, it is up to us (but not us alone) to expose these social and class rifts, and to nurture the flame that rises out of the widening chasm.

To expose and frame the conditions of open social war will require an uncommon commitment to place. It will take time to learn the terrain of a locality within the metropolis. The particular social undercurrents of capital and power in any place are too mystified to understand in a month or a year. We

cannot expect to move somewhere and comprehend neighborhood dynamics, local alliances, political and social actors, historical context, hidden geographies—social space—within any concise amount of time. Firsthand knowledge of the terrain is key to our success; establishing ourselves in places is one of the first steps in realizing social war.

We inhabit a place in an effort to understand it. In the process, we build: relationships, infrastructure at odds with capital, liberated autonomous zones. All this is done outside the confines of subculture, always collectively. As we learn more, our projects become more appropriate and threatening, wedging open the fault lines exposed by local conflict. Taking into account local exigencies, we might take over land to cultivate food, stop paying rent, attack the police, occupy buildings, seize material, or reconstruct the means of production inside our expanding stronghold. We capitalize on every misstep and weakness in the system to deepen our collective opposition. Thus, the lines of the social war are drawn.

## An Opening Salvo

Eventually liberated space will become too much for power to bear. We can expect the worst in terms of violent repression and insidious co-optation, and this will be nothing new to us, nor the other oppressed communities who are our allies. It is here that our war becomes defensive, *conservative*, all the while actively expanding its zones of defense. The

Greek anarchist neighborhood of Exarchia birthed one of the most powerful insurrections in recent memory; suddenly, the whole metropolis became a simultaneously offensive and defense front. Police, car dealerships, and Christmas trees were no longer welcome, and were removed from the landscape. We already know that we own everything—the task is to exclude the intrusions of capital and power.

Everyone knows where they stand when the conflict erupts. In Greece, more than just young anarchists rioted and supported the insurrection, while bourgeois shoppers cowered in fear as stores were immolated. If they do not know, we will involve them.

It is worth noting that there will obviously not be just one engagement in the social war. There will be no single determining battle. We are of course aware that “the Revolution” is a myth. One may be tempted to view the realization of social war as an expanding singularity. On the contrary: engagements are occurring all the time, the social rift deepening with each one. We need only to begin to pursue these particular engagements strategically.

“Everything about the insurrectionary process remains to be built.”

After the police murder of Oscar Grant in Oakland, it took a week for any substantial response, anarchist or otherwise, to materialize. What finally did have been mythologized as the “Oakland Rebellion”: one night of minor rioting contained

within a few city blocks, a handful of autonomous attacks against the responsible institutions. This—while a month earlier Alexandros Grigoropoulos was killed in Athens. The whole of Greece erupted in rage, and for more than two weeks the metropolis was torn apart and remade.

The social conditions of Greece are undeniably different from those of the US. The history of military dictatorship has all but invalidated the Greek national hegemony, and nearly every person there maintains a deep suspicion of state authority. We cannot re-create Greece. But if we look closely enough, there are badly patched tears in American social life as well. What is required of us is a jarring rip at the seams.

It is these rifts where the foundations of insurrection will be located. And in order to build an effective base, we must move beyond our subcultures and identities. An isolated and alone insurrectionary is hardly an insurrectionary at all, and the true power of the insurrection lies in the potential for its generalization. Can we hide in our neighbors' houses? Can our community exist autonomously from the flows of capital? Can we defend each other from the police and the army? Are mayor's decrees irrelevant in our neighborhood? We pursue that day.

## *Postscript: The Realization of Social War*

*Over the past eleven years, the empty lot had been transformed. What had been a patch of tall brown weeds and cracked pavement was now a lush garden. Rows of zucchini, growing out into the stone pathways, strawberries just coming into bloom, and in the far corner a full acre of corn. The fruit trees were finally growing above the wooden fence. After more than a decade of concerted work by the surrounding community, they could provide themselves with all the fresh vegetables they required.*

*Property values had recently increased in the neighborhood—it was now profitable to develop the once vacant, abandoned lot. The community had neglected to officially purchase the land, and the owner, of course, wanted sell it to a well-known developer. He had informed the coordinators of the garden of his intention. But the community refused to relinquish the land.*

*Time was up, the police had been called. They would arrive to evict the garden within the week. The community held a short meeting, and resolved to defend their land through whatever means necessary.*

*Two days later, a dependable source told the community that the police would be moving in the next morning. They responded, gathering the necessary materials for defense: rocks, empty bottles, gasoline, caltrops, sticks, metal bars, various debris, while others sent out the call for assistance*



*from their allies and neighbors.*

*At dawn the next morning, three police cars and a bulldozer approached the neighborhood. As the police turned onto the boulevard that led to the garden, a crowd of two hundred blocked their path. The group quickly constructed barricades while others locked themselves to each other and sat down. The police called for backup and issued a warning to disperse. The blockaders did not move. A van of riot police arrived, and began to threaten the use of force. After an hour, the police lost patience and pitilessly gassed the blockade, moving in with batons. The group withdrew, the bulldozer cleared the barricade, and the police continued on their way.*

*Three blocks from the garden, a hail of stones rained down on the police procession. In the next moment, the fiery arcs of molotov cocktails traced their way through the air, exploding across the police vehicles. The squad cars were immobilized by the hail of rocks and fire—the officers scrambled out of their flaming vehicles, running for safety. A block away, the riot police exited their van, formed a line, and planned their next move. As soon as they had regrouped, attacks came from all directions—adjacent yards, cross streets, back allies. Officers were knocked down by the sheer volume of the projectiles. They fired rubber bullets wantonly, not sure who was an enemy or bystander. They could not be sure how many they were up against, the situation was strategically untenable. They piled hurriedly into the van and fled.*

*The next day the city was flooded with propaganda, posters declaring “JOIN THE DEFENSE”, newspaper headlines reading “HOODLUMS ATTACK POLICE”. Very quickly, normally inactive citizens made up their minds as to which side they were on.*

*The police did not give up that day. In the following weeks the city was torn apart, as all the wounds of local injustice and oppression were simultaneously re-opened.*

*In that city, the police now walk in fear, the politicians know they are ignored, and certainly no one wants to invest. Meanwhile, the local communities govern themselves. An insurrection is begun.*

**an edited version of this piece appeared  
in Fire To The Prisons 6**

**it appears here in its full, original form**

**anti-copyright 2009**

